

Student no 0904989

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Tutor: Peter Moran

Student: Philip Benton

Student ID: 0904989

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INTRODUCTION

About the author

The author is currently employed as the Chief Executive of the University of Salford Students' Union (USSU), an unincorporated association and registered charity. USSU is a student-led, student-focussed organisation dedicated to enhancing the lives of students through representation, campaigning, lobbying, extracurricular activities and the provision of commercial services. USSU employs fifty five people across a variety of managerial, administrative and commercial functions. The author is accountable to the USSU Trustee Board and the role is predominantly responsible for the implementation and delivery of organisational strategy through effective management and leadership of USSU's human, physical and financial resources.

The area under investigation

The issue to be investigated is how to provide appropriate performance management and appraisal for specific members of the Trustee Board. Within a Students' Union, a pivotal leadership role for the organisation is played by a group of elected students known as the Sabbatical Officers. The Sabbatical Officers are elected by the student body to lead and be employed by the Union for a period of one year, acting as the political representatives of the student body. Primarily, the Officers are expected to represent the student body to the University, to the local community, and nationally within the National Union of Students. They also work to engage students in the activities and services the Union provides on campus, whilst ensuring that the Union is responsive to and shaped by the needs of those students. Accountability for their performance in this activity usually rests within the democratic structures of the Union, where they would report on their work, whilst seeking membership support and approval for future courses of action, particularly in their political role.

The democratic process does not allow for, nor is it intended to provide, any form of formal performance management or appraisal of the Officers' work. The democratic structures are more suited to political appraisal of Officer performance, akin to a

parliamentary select committee, rather than identifying personal development needs and objectives that are aligned to the strategic direction of the organisation.

The Officers are legally regarded as employees of the Union (NUS, 2007 and 2011) and are expected to contribute to the strategic development and performance of the Union. However unlike other employees, the Officers are also Trustees of the Union and thus have to play a strategic and governance role within the organisation too. The role of a Trustee places a set of legal obligations on the Officers with regard to their stewardship of USSU as a charity which, if poorly managed, could lead to significant conflicts of interest arising. As a trustee, the Officers are accountable to the Board of Trustees and obliged to act in the best interests of USSU at all times (Charity Commission, 2009). Key within that role is the need to act as the employer of the permanent staff team. Consequently, the Officers do not have a line manager and as they only work for the Union for a year, do not have to demonstrate continuous improvement in their performance against objectives year on year through the Union's performance appraisal process. However, they do set themselves objectives for their year in office, and are expected to work as a team to deliver those objectives.

Strategic Significance

Human resource management (HRM) literature debates at some length the benefits to an organisation of providing performance management and/or performance appraisal where an organisation seeks a strategic integrated approach to personnel practice (Bach, 2005). USSU implements performance appraisal throughout the permanent staffing structure on an annual basis, and links individual objectives to the achievement of the strategic plan from the Chief Executive down through the management team and beyond to front line employees. Within USSU, although a formal appraisal takes place on an annual basis there is an ongoing process of performance management for all employees encompassing reviews not only of outputs and outcomes but also of individuals' performance in terms of upholding and living the values of the USSU in achieving those outcomes. Bach (2005) views such a process as shifting performance appraisal from being an annual process to becoming a key driver in enhancing overall organisation performance.

This being the case the lack of a formal performance appraisal and management structure for the Sabbatical Officers could risk those four individuals, and the organisation, being unable to identify how they contribute to organisational performance. There could exist a sense of alienation from the rest of the organisation if the Sabbatical Officers perceive that the organisation is not moving in the same direction as they are. Given the key leadership role the Officers play both as Trustees and political representatives, it is vital that their objectives and performance are aligned with the overall direction of the organisation and, indeed, contribute to setting that direction. Furthermore, although USSU has no specific competition and therefore is not necessarily concerned with aiming to achieve a sustained competitive advantage over other organisations, the Charity Commission expects well governed charities to be focussed on impact and outcomes (Charity Commission, 2008). USSU uses a series of performance indicators to measure its impact and outcomes, but the nearest comparison it makes to achieving sustainable competitive advantage is to measure whether it has made a positive impact on the lives of its members. At the very least, the Sabbatical Officers deserve to have their contribution to USSU appraised to ensure such a positive impact is being achieved.

Research Question and Objectives

How can a performance appraisal model be developed for Sabbatical Officers that enables them to contribute effectively to organisational performance whilst respecting their role as Trustees and elected political representatives?

1. To critically evaluate what constraints the role of a Trustee places on performance management for Sabbatical Officers.
2. To investigate which aspects of the Sabbatical role are suitable for performance appraisal outside of the democratic process.
3. To propose a performance appraisal model for Sabbatical Officers and make recommendations about its implementation.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review the academic literature around the use and style of performance appraisal, relating it to the wider issue of performance management. The chapter will close with a synthesis of the issues into a conceptual framework.

2.1 Performance Appraisal Defined

Morris et al (2008) note that performance appraisal (PA) was once a basic system of producing an annual assessment of a subordinate's performance, yet has come to be seen as encompassing a variety of processes to assess employees, encourage their development and distribute rewards.

Through a series of empirical studies, Piggot-Irvine (2003) mapped all the elements of an essential appraisal process (figure 1). This model clearly establishes what the cultural tenets of a PA process should look like. It appears predicated on an assumption that it could be applied to any organisational context, whereas Boice and Kleiner (1997) assert the need for a contingency based approach. Respect, openness and trust are highlighted as the most important elements from the model (Appelbaum et al, 2011), suggesting that they should be present at all times between managers and employees, going on to state that to facilitate this feedback should be given regularly, a view corroborated by others (Kuvaas, 2011; Heathfield, 2007; Boice and Kleiner 1997).

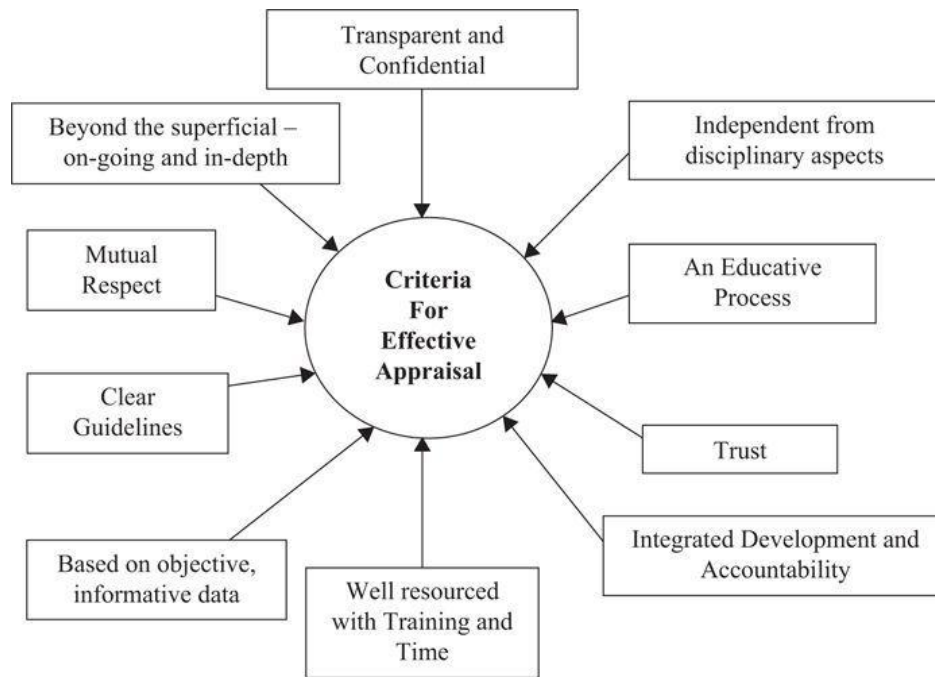


Figure 1, Features of an effective appraisal system (Piggot-Irvine 2003, cited in Appelbaum et al, 2011)

Much of the literature now discusses PA as located within performance management (PM) (Piggot-Irvine, 2003). Boselie (2010) discusses PM as a system offering a sophisticated evaluation of employee contributions to an organisation, bringing together a range of activities aimed at a convergence of employee and organisational performance. An annual PA is viewed as one such activity alongside goal setting, goal evaluation and personal development planning (Boselie 2010). This view is complemented by a CIPD (2005) survey identifying around 87% of respondents using PA as an element of PM. Boselie's (2010) PM model can be represented as a continual cycle (figure 3). It would be fair to expect that Piggot-Irvine's (2003) PA features would be present in such a cycle if the process is to be a success. Whilst the model is mono-causal in nature, assuming that following the cycle will ultimately increase performance and achieve goals, it clearly places PA as belonging within a wider PM process.



Figure 2, Performance Management Cycle, adapted from Boselie (2010)

However, Pointon (2010) argues that universally aligning PA with PM obscures the important differences between the two notions: PA assesses the individual employee effort and achievements that contribute to a wider PM approach (Pointon, 2010) and acquires the information to enable that assessment to take place (Hannay, 2010). Taking these definitions into account, PA literature begins to divide in two: developmental appraisal of behaviour compared to evaluative appraisal of performance, with both views considering if PA becomes then a means of exercising organisational control (Chen et al, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Bratton & Gold, 2007, Morris et al 2007)

2.2 Developmental Appraisal

Developmental appraisal is focussed on the notion that organisational performance improves as employees own performance improves, and that this is achieved through regular reviews of the way in which people work rather than an evaluation of outputs (Chen et al, 2009, Armstrong, 2001). This view regards the PA process as being

something that happens more than once a year (Armstrong, 2001; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2008), possibly blurring the line between PA and PM. There exists a focus on the need for clear expectations of behaviours and the job role itself to be articulated at the beginning of the cycle, backed up by continuous review and punctuated by an annual PA process. Bell (1994) identifies a developmental PA cycle, though it possesses some evaluative characteristics.

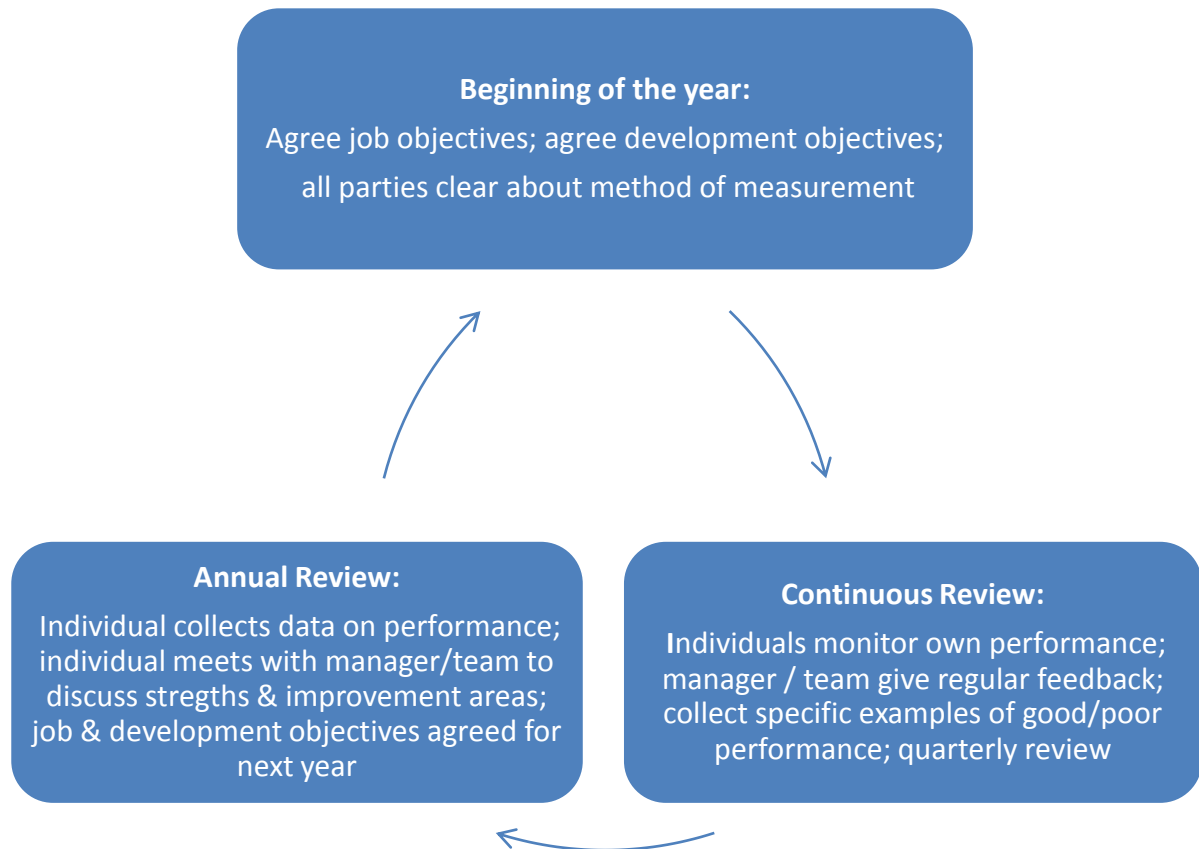


Figure 3, Developmental Appraisal system summary, adapted from Bell (1994)

The model provides a simple cycle of PA within a PM context, focussed on developing the individual's ability to perform. However it relies on an assumption that all parties are always in agreement on the direction of travel, and on an assumption that a clear organisational vision and strategy exists against which the annual development plan can

be produced. In addition, the notion of developmental PA becomes more one of a developmental PM system with a strong PA at its core.

Heathfield (2007:6) justifies “PA within developmental PM” by arguing that an evaluative PA process

“reflects and underpins an old fashioned, paternalistic, top down, autocratic mode of management”

Further, she develops the simple PM cycles above in line with Kuvaas (2010) and Piggot-Irvine (2003)’s definitions by indicating the importance of regular feedback: discussing personal development in addition to organisational goals, derived from multiple sources (Heathfield, 2007; Schraeder et al 2007; Boice & Kleiner, 1997). This multi-source approach is discussed as 360 degree PA. 360 feedback is often identified as key to developmental PA, but not when used outside a broader PM structure (Morgan et al, 2005) or without a high feedback culture being present (Kuvaas, 2011).

Hannay (2010) proposes a model of PA that appears evaluative but centres on being developmental, linked to a wider PM cycle. Here, PM is borne out of three elements: performance planning and goal setting regular coaching and feedback; and an annual evaluation (Hannay, 2010). Formal evaluation is based on Noe’s (2010, cited in Hannay, 2010) three purposes of PA: collecting information for personnel decisions, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and linking performance and organisational strategy. The model’s strength is that, subject to the method used to measure and assess performance it bridges developmental and evaluative dimensions of PA, yet clearly sits as part of a wider, organisational PM approach. However, it suffers from a lack of definition for the method of assessment. Within the focus of this research, the elements of evaluation / reward and planning / decision making could be deemed superfluous as the Sabbatical Officers’ role is that of office bearer for a fixed in time and remuneration. In contrast, the motivation / development aspect offers a useful dimension of analysis for developmental PA.

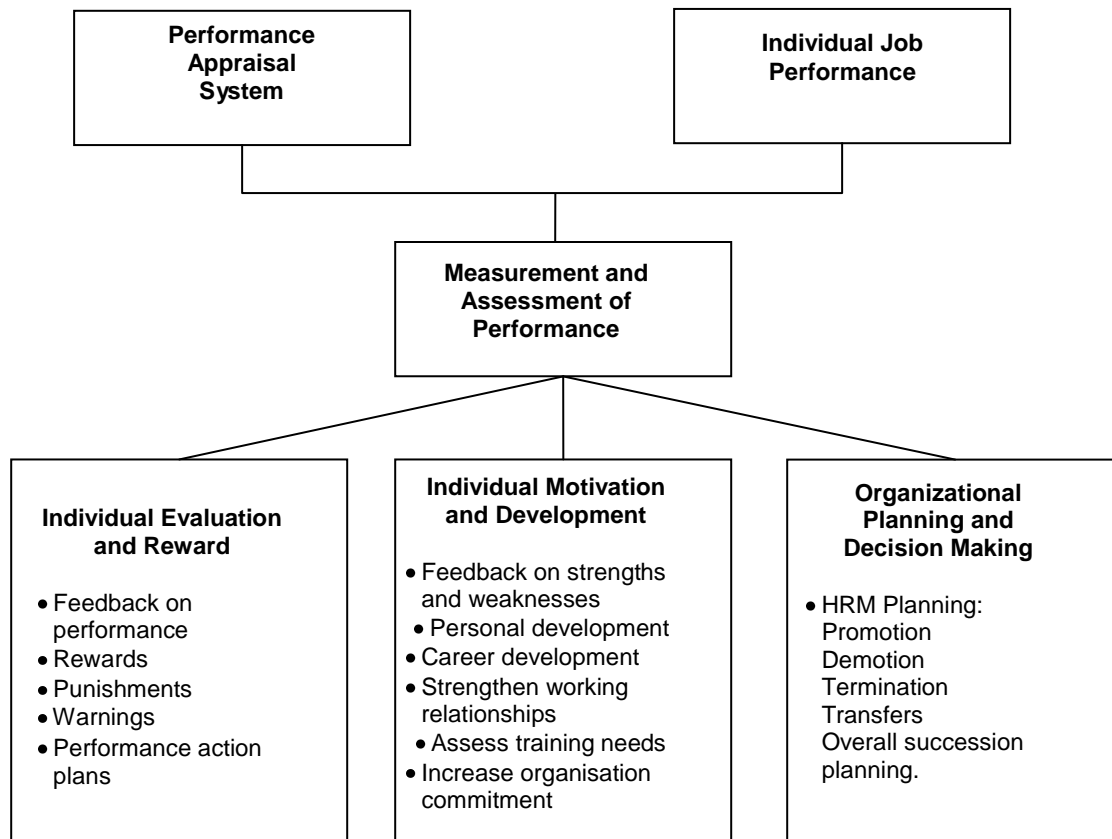


Figure 4, Performance Appraisal Process Model (Hannay, 2010)

2.3 Evaluative Appraisal.

Many traditional appraisal schemes are underpinned by an evaluative methodology in that,

“management of employee performance is limited to aspects that supervisors can influence”

(Schraeder and Jordan, 2011:7).

Randall (1994, cited in Bratton and Gold, 2007) noted a basic process behind most evaluative schemes based on defining work, setting targets, performance, and assessment against targets. Other authors had expanded this reductionist process and set it in a wider PM context. Bevan and Thompson (1992, cited in Bach, 2005) expand it into five steps that link to Boselie’s (2010) PM cycle. The additional steps recognise the developmental dimension to PA.



Figure 5, Evaluative appraisal process, adapted from Bach (2005)

Brown et al (2010) accept that evaluative PA has value, viewing the process being designed to positively impact on employee behaviours leading to improved organisational performance. It is arguable that this process is not enough in itself: it must also possess sufficient quality in execution (Brown et al, 2010; Schraeder and

Jordan, 2011). When employees believe the PA process has been procedurally fair, they are more accepting of the judgements and outcomes the process bestows upon them (Thurston and McNall, 2010; Chen et al, 2009) It would seem then that fairness is as key to an evaluative driven PA as it is within Piggot-Irvine's (2003) initial definition.

Criticism of evaluative PA is that it can result in a quantitative process relying on a checklist approach (Pointon, 2010), resulting in PA that seeks to test conformity with proscribed behaviours and objectives (Torrington et al, 2011), thus acting as a means of organisational control (Bach, 2005). As in developmental PA, there is an increasing focus on the use of multi-rater approaches to collecting data on employee performance (Newbold, 2008) to deliver procedural justice (Thurston and McNall, 2010). Criticism of multi-rater approaches notes that as many drawbacks and biases exist as within top down evaluation processes, particularly when subordinates are required to rate a manager (Torrington et al, 2011; Millward et al, 2010; Drew, 2009; Taylor, 2008).

2.4 The Trustee Dimension

Criticism of both evaluative and developmental PA comes through the view that the process is ethically inappropriate (Bach 2005, Prowse and Prowse 2009), requires managers to supervise rather than lead, produces a subordinated working relationship (Taylor, 2008; Bach, 2005) and diminishes organisational flexibility (Nickols, 2007). Within the focus of this research is the need to recognise that the individuals to be appraised are not only employees: through their trustee role they are office-bearers, employers and political leaders of the organisation. In this context the ethical critique of PA holds some weight. The trustee role offers a different dimension to PA. Pointon (2010) identifies a framework called a "conversation with purpose" used by the CIPD for appraising the contribution of board level volunteers to organisational performance (table 1 and figure 6).

COMPETENCY	MEANING
Strategic Direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting vision, values & purpose • Identifying resources • Thinking & planning strategically
Business Judgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weigh evidence & analyse ideas • Reach independent & objective conclusions • Understand complex financial information • Assimilate information quickly
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure integrity & probity in execution of management • Display those qualities in the role
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work supportively & build team cohesion • Constructively probe, challenge, & add value to organisational performance & direction

Table 1, Competency framework for volunteer board members, adapted from Pointon (2010)

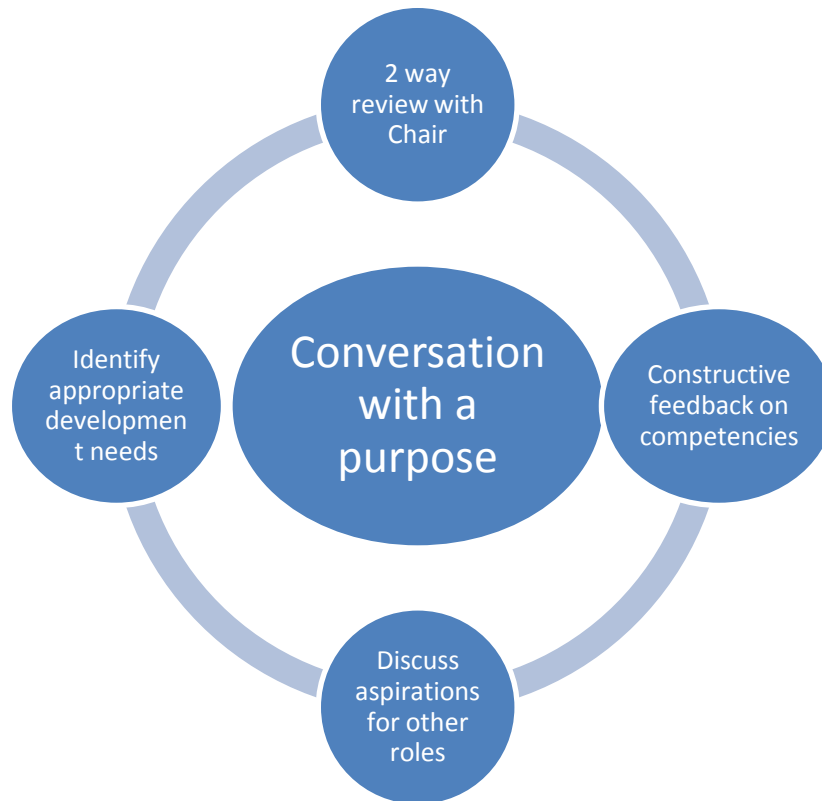


Figure 6, Performance review process for volunteer board members, adapted from Pointon (2010)

This process is complemented by the best practice guidelines of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) (2010) and the Charity Commission (2008) creating standards by which trustee performance can be measured. Pointon (2010) and the NCVO / Charity Commission (2010/2008) standards can be seen as supporting developmental PA. The informality of the process risks bias and subjectivity, though the non-managerial nature of the conversation's inter-relationships would provide some mitigation against those factors. This process complements and adds value to Hannay's (2010) individual motivation / development aspect of PA. It would be difficult within the context under review for anything other than a developmental PA approach to be utilised given the subjects' role as leaders of the organisation. Equally, the question would exist as to who should hold the conversation as everyone else in the organisation is technically subordinate to those roles.

Trustee Standard	Definition
Safeguard & promote the values and mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting out the long term direction • Uphold the values • Support delivery of the aims & objectives
Determine strategy & structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are values & mission translated into aims & activities? • How are structures & processes developed to implement them?
Be effective, responsible & accountable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organisation legally compliant? • Is the organisation well managed? • Is the organisation meeting its aims and objectives & upholding its governing document?
Exercise a duty of prudence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the charity is and remains solvent • Avoid activities that may place the organisation at undue risk • Are resources being used reasonably to further the aims and objects?
Make sure the board of trustees functions effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the board acting in the best interests of the organisation? • Are the board acting as a team?

Table 2, Performance standards for Trustees, adapted from NCVO (2010) and Charity Commission (2008)^b

2.5 Conceptualising a Framework for Analysis

As the focus of this study is to identify a performance appraisal process that respects the Trustee role of the individuals whilst enabling them to identify how they are contributing to organisational performance, no single model from the literature is applicable. Developing a conceptual framework requires a combination of specific elements from the literature. The conceptualisation is based on providing a developmental focus to the PA, with reference to the obligations of Trustees, set against enabling factors. Table 3 identifies the elements selected divided between enabling criteria and functional criteria.

Element	Detail	Source
Enabling Criteria 1	Procedural Justice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency of process • Fairness • Confidentiality 	Piggot-Irvine (2003); Chen et al (2011), Thurston and McNall (2010)
Enabling Criteria 2	Clarity of objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focussed goal setting • Clarity of job role • Development needs 	Piggot-Irvine (2003); Boselie, (2010); Bell (1994); Bevan & Thompson (1992, cited in Bach, 2005)
Enabling Criteria 3	Feedback Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous feedback & support 	Bell (1994); Heathfield (2007); Kuvaas (2011)
Enabling Criteria 4	Objective / Informative Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreed collation process • Multi-rater approach 	Piggot-Irvine (2003); Heathfield (2007)
Functional Criteria 1	Performance Review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review meeting • Discussion of feedback on Functional Criteria 2 & 3 	Bell (1994); Hannay (2010)
Functional Criteria 2	Motivation and Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on strengths and weaknesses • Personal development • Strengthen working relationships • Assess training needs 	Hannay (2010)
Functional Criteria 3	Trustee Competencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic direction • Business judgement • Governance • Relationships 	Pointon (2010); NCVO / Charity Commission (2010/2008)

Table 3, Sources of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework itself (figure 7) is intended to demonstrate the interaction between the three functional criteria for Sabbatical Officer appraisal, framed by a set of enabling criteria to guide the style of the appraisal.

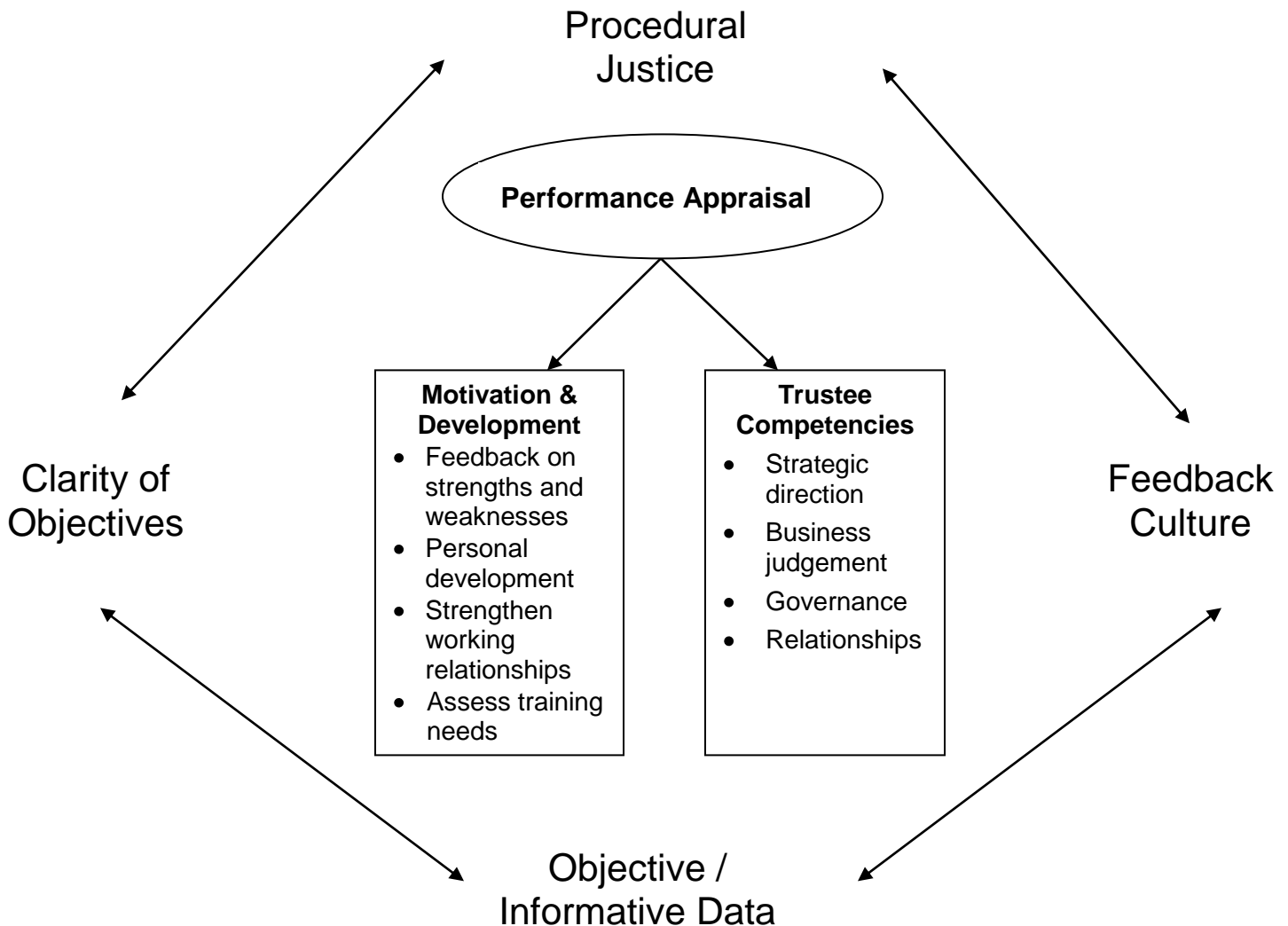


Figure 7, Conceptual Framework

The framework enables analysis of the research objectives thus:

- The “Motivation and Development” aspect proposes elements of the Sabbatical role that could be appraised outside of the democratic processes.

- The “Trustee Competence” dimension allows a critical evaluation of whether these elements constrain performance management for the Sabbatical Officers.
- The research phase will test the suitability of the functional criteria, together with whether the enablers deliver an appropriate form of appraisal.

CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter will focus on outlining the research philosophy to be followed, and the research methods to be employed in order to answer the research objectives successfully.

3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Easterby-Smith et al (2008) identify that understanding the philosophical dimension of management research can aid the researcher in clarifying their research design, recognising which designs will or will not work, and may enable the creation of research designs beyond the researcher's immediate experience. Saunders et al (2007), note that the philosophy the researcher adopts will contain certain assumptions about how that individual views the world which will ultimately underpin the methods chosen to enact the research itself. The chosen philosophy will be subject to the researcher's own view of the relationship between knowledge itself and the process undertaken to create it (Saunders et al, 2007). The literature identifies three key aspects of thinking about research philosophy: ontology, epistemology and axiology.

Ontology concerns a set of assumptions about the nature of reality, ranging from whether it is naturally occurring, or whether reality is a construct of social interaction between individuals (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). Epistemology concerns the way in which enquiries can be made of the world, and whether the same approach should be used for the natural world as the social world (Saunders et al, 2007). Axiology concerns the role the researcher's values play in the research process. Researchers demonstrate axiological skill by articulating their own values as a basis for making judgments on the research they conduct, whilst accepting that their choice of research philosophy and design are a representation of their own values (Saunders et al, 2007). Morgan and Smirnich (1980, cited in Collis and Hussey, 2003) represent the ontological assumptions as a continuum upon which it is possible to overlay the three main philosophical social science research philosophies of positivism, realism and social constructionism (figure 8).

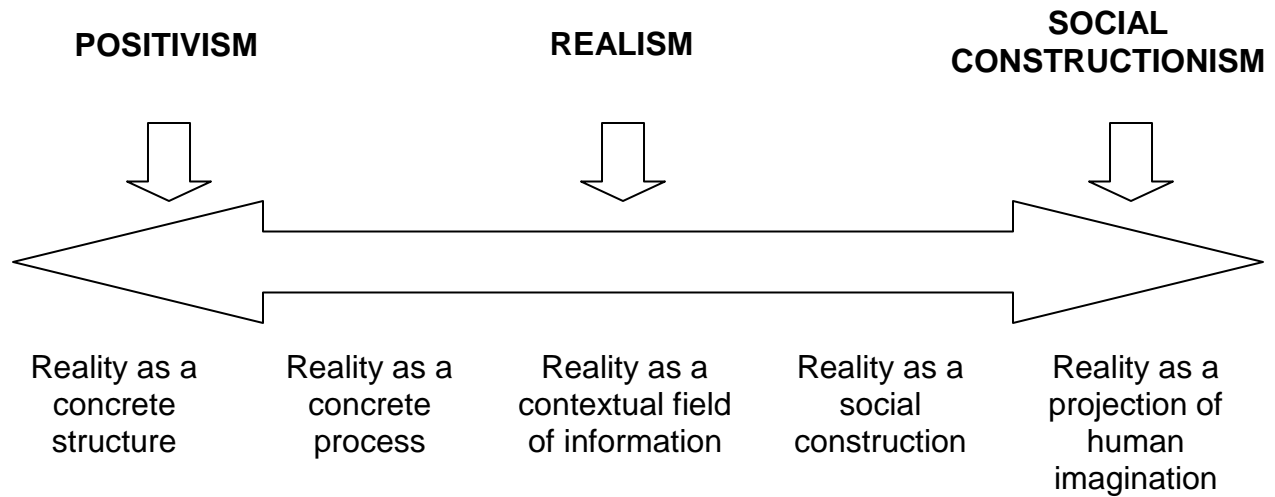


Figure 8, Ontological continuum, adapted from Collis and Hussey (2003)

3.1.1 Positivism

The positivist approach to research is based on the premise that the truth exists independent of the researcher who seeks to understand it, and that it can be verified by the collection of data that will demonstrate unarguable facts (Jankowicz, 2005). Positivism seeks to establish the facts of the causes of social phenomena with no regard to subjectivity of the environment, or the influence of the researcher on that environment – reality will exist regardless of how or when it is investigated (Collis and Hussey, 2003). A positivistic approach will seek to establish meaningful data through observable phenomena, preferably through a set of experimental exercises that can be verified and retested by other researchers (Saunders et al, 2007). The key purpose of this approach is to centre on the data not on opinions, and to attempt to draw conclusions from the specific context under review that can then be extrapolated to a wider environment or other organisations (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). Whilst this approach has its merits, it relies on absolutes of data and detachment of the researcher. Saunders et al (2007) argue that complete detachment is all but impossible though the positivistic approach can be used even if the philosophy is rejected.

3.1.2 Social Constructionism

Criticism of the positivist approach comes from the view that the world is too complex to be reduced to a series of generalised laws and theories (Saunders et al, 2007). Consequently, the social constructionism approach argues that the researcher interacts with the world around them, making sense of it through interpreting the actions of those under observation. The researcher thus has to adopt an empathetic approach to their work and understand the social world of their research subjects from their point of view (Saunders et al, 2007). Social constructionism therefore avoids establishing truths, but instead seeks to generate a socially agreed reality that is open to revision by others. The approach is thus based on generating an understanding rather than a truth, but still requires a rigorous research approach to ensure that these understandings are complete in themselves so as to enable the production of workable predictions (Jankowicz, 2005). In a management research context, social constructionism is appropriate in recognising the situational nature of workplaces in a way that positivism does not (Saunders et al, 2007), consequently what matters is the meaning of phenomena uncovered rather than their measurement (Collis and Hussey, 2003).

3.1.3 Realism

Whilst positivism and social constructionism represent extremes of research philosophies, realism offers a mid-point on the ontological continuum. Realism shares some of the positivist position, believing that there is an external reality which exists separate to human description, which can be subject to data collection and experimentation (Bryman and Bell, 2007), and assumes a scientific approach to developing knowledge (Saunders et al, 2007). Realism exists in a number of forms (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008), the common schools of thought being direct and critical realism (Saunders et al, 2007). Direct realism argues that what one experiences through the senses is an accurate portrayal of the world (Saunders et al, 2007) and that application of appropriate research methods will confirm that experience (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The direct realist would contend that the world is relatively unchanging and, similar to positivism, would debate whether the actions of a researcher could lead to a

change in that world or a change of understanding (Saunders et al, 2007). By contrast, critical realism argues that knowledge of reality requires an acceptance of a bigger picture than what the senses portray. A researcher can only understand the social world by understanding the social structures and processes that gave rise to it (Saunders et al, 2007). The critical realism view is often deemed appropriate in a business research context as it contends that the social world is complex and fluid, and that the researcher needs to understand the reasons behind that complexity and fluidity before recommending change (Saunders et al, 2007). Essentially, critical realism takes the ontological philosophy behind positivism and weaves a social constructionism thread through it, asserting that truth comes from a consensus of differing viewpoints (Easterby-Smith et al, 2007).

3.2 PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION

In establishing a philosophical position for the questions under review in this study, it is worth returning to analyse the key research objectives. The first objective seeks “to critically evaluate what constraints the role of a Trustee places on performance management for Sabbatical Officers”. Whilst “performance management” could be deemed to be a subject for a positivist approach in that it could be defined and measured, a social constructionist approach would arguably be appropriate too as “performance” is subject to human interpretation between rater and ratee. In addition, the literature review has shown the “role of a trustee” to be definable and measurable, but it is arguable that the definition comes from a social construct rather than pure experimentation and conclusion. The mix of positivism and social constructionism in this objective would suggest the need for a realist philosophy to be adopted.

The second research objective seeks to “investigate which aspects of the Sabbatical role are suitable for performance appraisal outside of the democratic process”. Identifying aspects of the Sabbatical Officer role suitable for appraisal would seem to suggest a positivist approach, as these ought to be measurable and replicable over a range of occasions. However, as with objective one, it is possible to argue that the role has at least partly developed through social interaction. A realist approach which seeks

to understand the reason behind the existence of the roles and whether they are appropriate for performance appraisal may be most appropriate. Figure 9 maps the two objectives onto the ontological continuum.

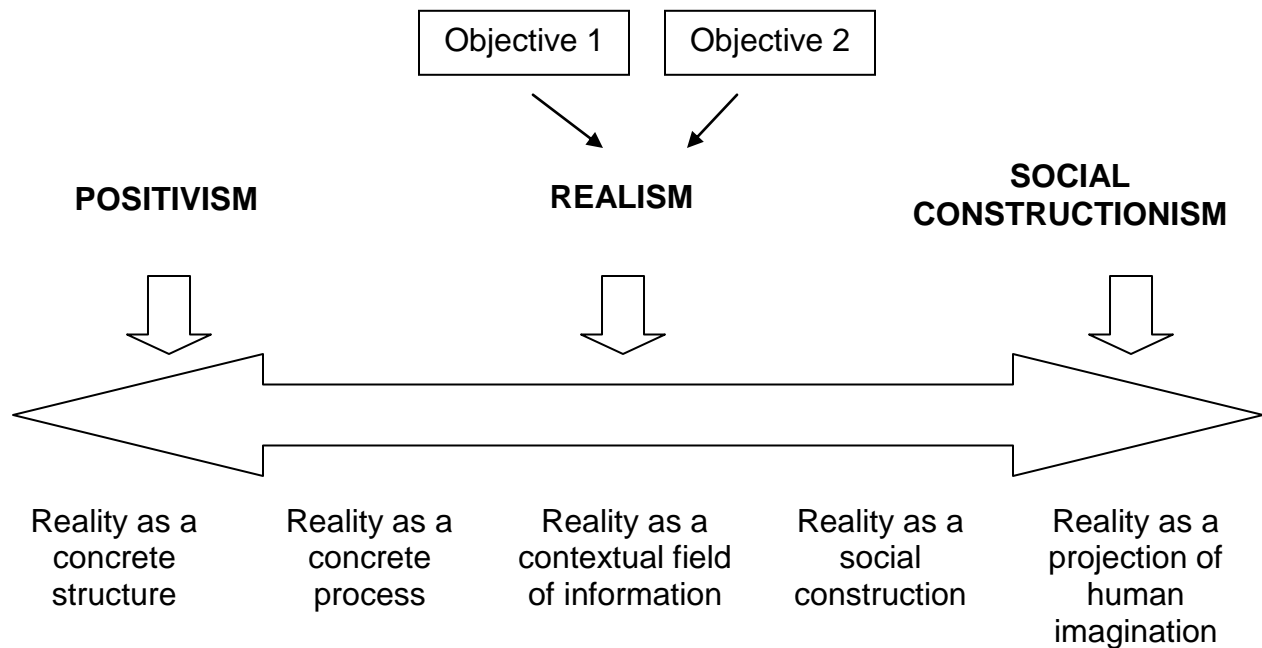


Figure 9, Research objectives mapped onto the ontological continuum

As both objectives merit a realist approach, then realism will be the underpinning philosophy of this research. Consequently a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods will be considered for the research methodology.

3.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY

Having settled on a research philosophy, there are a number of possible research strategies which can be pursued. These include case studies, longitudinal studies, action research, experimental studies and surveys (Collis and Hussey, 2003). The actual strategy chosen is dependent on the research objectives, setting and philosophy. Given the realist philosophy of this research a case study strategy is proposed as it

enables an in-depth review of one or a small number of organisations, occurrences or people over a time (Easterby-Smith et al, 2007).

Within a case study, context is all important (Collis and Hussey, 2003) as it invariably concerns gathering detailed data about an area of analysis leading to the development of in-depth knowledge. Yin (2003, cited in Saunders et al, 2003:139) reinforces the issue of context being important by noting that in a case study setting,

“the boundaries between the phenomenon being studied and the context within which it is being studied are not clearly evident”

Some literature points to single case studies suiting social constructionist philosophies (Collis and Hussey, 2003), but its ability to provide answers to question of “why” as well as “what” and “how”, plus the use of multiple and combined data collection techniques (Saunders et al, 2007) make it an appropriate strategy for a realist approach. Eisenhardt (1989, cited in Easterby-Smith et al, 2007) noted that case studies within a realist epistemology should have clear research designs set from the outset, but be capable of adaptation as the research progresses. In addition, multiple methods of data collection will provide a triangulated set of responses to ensure that the data received is valid and reliable.

Saunders et al (2007) further suggest that case studies are an appropriate research strategy to explore, challenge and test existing theories. As the conceptual framework proposed in chapter two is driven by existing theories about performance appraisal, the case study strategy would seem to provide an appropriate process to test the framework’s assumptions.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Having identified a realist philosophy and a case study approach for this research, it is appropriate to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather the required data. The combination of methods to provide corroborative evidence for the data or interpretations achieved is known as triangulation (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). In a realist approach, the intention is that the qualitative methods

triangulate the findings of the quantitative research particularly as each method has its own strengths and weaknesses of execution (Saunders et al, 2007). In order to achieve triangulation of results, three methods will be utilised in this study: data line analysis, self completion questionnaires, and semi structured interview.

3.4.1 Sample Size

Although there are around 120 Students' Unions across the United Kingdom Higher Education sector, due to the time constraints of the study, and ease of access to people and data the research and collection of data will be limited to the North West and North East regions. The two regions contain twenty two Students' Unions all of whom employ at least three Sabbatical Officers. The author works in the North West region and previously worked in the North East so has access to the Chief Executives of each organisation. The intention is to use a sample of both Chief Executives and a Sabbatical Officer from each Union in order to test the research objectives against the views of both the people who would implement an appraisal process and the people who would receive it. This would create a sample of forty four individuals. Limiting the research to a compact geographic area will most likely maximise data collection, but may reduce the overall representativeness of the sample (Saunders et al, 2007). However, the aim of the sample is to reduce bias as it contains a broad mix of types and size of Students' Union. The established business relationship with and geographical proximity to the sample should enable the author to interview and distribute questionnaires to the maximum number of individuals possible, and to employ techniques to ensure a high rate of return.

3.4.2 Data Line Analysis

Douglas (1995) proposed the method of data line analysis as an quick opening method of quantitative research to bring out themes or areas of concern for the subject being researched. The process involves the researcher producing a list of themes or issues and asking the respondent to rank them in terms of importance. The results of the exercise can then be collated in spreadsheet form enabling the researcher to assess the responses very easily. Douglas (1995) used fifty five statements for ranking, but it is arguable that this could be too many. In addition, some blank spaces can be left for the respondents to submit their own phrases, preventing the researcher only asking closed questions.

Table four highlights some of the generic advantages and disadvantages of a data line analysis exercise and contrasts those with some contextual observations regarding this research project.

According to the advantages and disadvantages of using data line analysis, the author will use this method to test the relative importance of the enabling and functional criteria identified in the conceptual framework. The method will enable an early identification of whether the criteria are sufficient, or whether the framework is missing anything. It will also identify which criteria the respondents believe to be most important: the enablers or the functions. Subject to time and geographical constraints, the research will be carried out via an internet based survey with the Chief Executive and a Sabbatical Officer from each Union in the two regions receiving an explanatory email followed by a web link to the research. The method will be piloted with a Chief Executive and Sabbatical Officer from each region.

	Generic	Contextual
Strengths	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Ease and speed of completion.</p> <p>Enables respondent validation.</p> <p>Enables the researcher's view to develop quickly.</p>	<p>Ease of completion for busy people.</p> <p>Quickly identify if conceptual framework is on right track.</p> <p>Can be conducted quickly at a regional meeting of Unions, or via internet research.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>How many statements comprise the right number?</p> <p>Respondent may not meaningfully engage with the exercise.</p> <p>Rudimentary method of quantitative research, requires triangulation.</p> <p>Respondents may offer too many of their own choices.</p> <p>If own statements end up ranked, may become statistically insignificant & not register as important.</p> <p>Phrases on cards may possess different significance to researcher and respondent.</p> <p>Unfamiliarity with the method may require time input from researcher to explain the process.</p>	<p>Size of sample may not be sufficient to generate accurate information.</p> <p>Two quantitative exercises may be asking a lot of the respondents, so design and method of request will be important.</p>

Table 4 Comparison of generic and contextual strengths and weaknesses of a data line analysis exercise

3.4.3 Self-Completion Questionnaires

Questionnaires are regarded as a one of the most widely used data collection techniques given that they are an efficient method of collecting responses from a large sample prior to developing a quantitative analysis (Saunders et al, 2007). For this research, the proposal is to test the objectives by using an internet administered questionnaire, with each participant being sent a link to the survey website. This method is rapidly developing into a common source of data collection (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008).

Table five highlights some of the generic advantages and disadvantages of a web based self completion questionnaire and contrasts those with some contextual observations regarding this research project.

According to the advantages and disadvantages of using web based self completion questionnaires, the author will construct the questionnaire using predominantly closed questions on a Likert scale. A mid-point will not be used to avoid respondents exhibiting central tendencies. As a realist philosophy enables the use of open and closed questions (Collis and Hussey, 2003), some open text responses will also be included. A web link to the questionnaires will be emailed to the Chief Executive and a Sabbatical Officer from each of the Students' Unions in the sample. The web based nature of the questionnaire will enable the maintenance of anonymity and there will be an opportunity for the user to validate their responses at the survey's end. The questionnaire will be piloted with a Chief Executive and Sabbatical Officer from each region.

	Generic	Contextual
Strengths	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Appealing design.</p> <p>Filters can be put in place to move users to correct questions subject to previous responses.</p> <p>Automatic download of answers to database for analysis.</p> <p>High probability of the right person answering.</p> <p>Maintains privacy / anonymity of respondent.</p> <p>Low risk of questionnaire contamination or tampering.</p> <p>Consistency of question asking</p> <p>Ease of completion (subject to design).</p>	<p>Sample population has high incidence of internet / IT usage – unlikely to be put off by technology.</p> <p>Ease of completion for busy people.</p> <p>Availability of email contact details ensures right person answers.</p> <p>Anonymity important.</p> <p>Some technical language use possible.</p> <p>Author's employer has subscription access to www.surveymonkey.com</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Can limit sample to internet competent respondents.</p> <p>Evidence of poor response rates, particularly as no interviewer present to administer completion.</p> <p>Risk of missed data when people choose not to answer.</p> <p>Needs to be reasonably short in length to "hook" respondents.</p> <p>Does not support complex questioning.</p> <p>Must be an interest to the respondent to prompt a reply.</p> <p>Variability in understanding the question without prompts from an interviewer</p> <p>No opportunity to probe responses</p> <p>Requires access to an online survey package.</p>	<p>What incentive to complete? – reliant on personal relationship with author rather than employment or financial relationship.</p> <p>Small sample size may affect validity / reliability if response rate is low.</p> <p>Sabbatical Officer respondents may not understand the technical nature of the questioning through lack of experience.</p>

Table 5 Comparison of generic and contextual strengths and weaknesses of web based self completion questionnaires

3.4.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews can be defined as a process for accumulating data by asking selected participants a series of questions to understand what they do, think or feel about an issue (Collis and Hussey, 2003). Given the realist philosophy of this research, and in order to provide qualitative data to triangulate the quantitative methods outlined above, semi-structured interviews are proposed as a third method. A semi-structured interview takes a list of questions on specific areas related to the research but allows the respondent a degree of latitude in how they respond (Bryman and Bell, 2008). The process is intended to be flexible and may differ from participant to participant, though Crowther and Lancaster (2009) challenge the need for a script or schedule. Using open questions can enable participants to provide their own definition and description of situation or propositions, though this does make comparison of the responses difficult (Saunders et al, 2007).

Table six highlights some of the generic advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured interviews and contrasts those with some contextual observations regarding this research project.

According to the advantages and disadvantages of using semi-structured interviews, the author proposed to undertake six interviews using open questions with three Chief Executives and three Sabbatical Officers identified by random sample from the two regions. Subject to participant agreement the interviews will be audio recorded. The method will seek to underpin and corroborate the quantitative data generated by the other two methods, and to focus in on issues raised or not covered by that data. A pilot interview will be conducted with one other Chief Executive and one other Sabbatical Officer.

	Generic	Contextual
Strengths	<p>Open questioning allows opportunity to probe points of interest.</p> <p>Enables researcher to test the respondent's understanding of concepts and issues.</p> <p>Flexibility of process enables question order to be varied to match the flow of conversation.</p> <p>Can be audio-recorded with participant's permission.</p> <p>Questions can be targeted specifically to the research objectives.</p> <p>Data likely to be of good quality and recent.</p> <p>Non verbal cues can be used to identify secondary questioning opportunities.</p>	<p>Shared understanding of subject matter between researcher and respondents should allow for rich conversation.</p> <p>Familiarity of researcher and respondents should enable an open process to be established.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Costly in terms of time and geographical travel.</p> <p>Lack of anonymity for respondents.</p> <p>Variability in responses can make data recording difficult.</p> <p>Requires good interviewing skills, and consistency of approach from one interview to another.</p> <p>Need to be aware of interviewer and respondent bias,</p> <p>Recording the data and maintaining the interview process may not be compatible skills in the interviewer.</p> <p>Prior events may influence responses</p>	<p>Familiarity between researcher and respondents risks bias in responses.</p> <p>Sabbatical Officers may not have sufficient experience to answer questions in depth.</p>

Table 6 Comparison of generic and contextual strengths and weaknesses semi-structured interviews

3.8 TRIANGULATION, VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Triangulation requires the results of one research method to be corroborated against results achieved employing another method (Bryman and Bell, 2007) and enables a greater degree of accuracy and insight to be achieved than when a single method has been applied (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). Table seven compares the key strengths and weaknesses of the three research methods chosen in order to demonstrate the achievement of triangulation in this study.

Data Line Analysis	Low cost +	Anonymity preserved +	Easy data recording +	High quality recent data +	Rudimentary method –	Face to face contact possible +	Option for open responses provides some flexibility +	Participant validation possible +
Web-based Self Completion Questionnaires	Low cost +	Anonymity preserved +	Easy data recording +	High quality recent data +	Robust method +	No face to face contact –	May not offer opportunity for open responses or open responses of low value –	Participant validation not always possible –
Semi Structured Interviews	Costly in terms of time and geographical travel. –	Lack of anonymity –	Data recording can be complex –	High quality recent data +	Robust, in depth method +	Face to face contact possible +	Completely open responses allow for development of data +	Participant validation possible +
Triangulation achieved?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Table 7, Comparison of research methods employed to demonstrate triangulation

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